

**THIS OUR HYMN OF GRATEFUL PRAISE
November 18, 2007**

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**Psalm 65
Luke 9:10-17**

**“And all ate and were filled.
What was left over was gathered up,
twelve baskets of broken pieces.”
Luke 9:17 (NRSV)**

To experience the goodness in life, therefore,
is to be in touch with the gift of God.
We all have memories of the goodness of creation.
We have smelled the freshness of the earth after rain.
We have known the delight of biting into a crisp autumn apple.
We have gazed upon field after field of golden corn.
We have touched the smoothness of a rock, sea-washed for millennia.
The goodness is there. We are called into an awareness of it
All ground is holy, for within it is the goodness of God.

J. Philip Newell
The Book of Creation

Author Kurt Vonnegut died earlier this year. It was Vonnegut who said that his epitaph, should he ever need one, God forbid, would be “The only proof he ever needed of the existence of God was music.” He appeared frequently on the college lecture circuit in the years before he died. He was funny, irreverent; an “unbelieving believer” he called himself. His classic novel *Slaughterhouse Five* was written out of his experience as a POW in World War II, incarcerated in a slaughterhouse five stories beneath street level during the Allied firebombing of Dresden. He and a few other prisoners emerged the next day to see the utter devastation, no life moving, buildings burned to the ground as far as the eye could see. His writing thereafter contained a poignant appreciation of the gift of human life, the idiosyncrasies, the precious peculiarities and oddities, the simple uniqueness of every person, every human life.

In a presentation at the University of Wisconsin a few years ago, he told the audience about his late Uncle Alex. “He was my father’s kid brother, a childless graduate of Harvard who was an honest life insurance salesman in

Indianapolis.” He was well-read and wise. And his principal complaint about other human beings was that they so seldom noticed when they were happy. “So when we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in the summer, say, and talking lazily about this and that, almost buzzing like honeybees, Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is.’”

“Please notice when you are happy,” he told the Wisconsin students, “and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is.’”

And then he did an extraordinary thing. He asked the students if they ever had a teacher who made them happier to be alive, prouder to be alive, than they previously believed possible. Nearly every student raised a hand. “Now please say the name of that teacher out loud to someone sitting or standing near you.” When the din of all those voices died down, he said, “All done? ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is.’”

How very much there is for which to be grateful! How very much goodness and grace and happiness is given to us and how easy to hurry through the days of our lives, busy, preoccupied, overscheduled, overburdened, and to miss it. And so Thanksgiving has always been my favorite. No gifts to buy, no parties, no holiday rush, no busy social schedule, a few cards maybe, a meal with loved ones, dear friends, and a simple reminder of how blessed we are to be alive.

Gratitude is the heart of our faith. Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown used to say that “the distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is ‘grace’”—and there is also a word that describes the response we are called to make: that word is “gratitude.” “Now Thank We All Our God,” Brown said, was the best, all-purpose hymn, good for every occasion.

Gratitude is the heart of the matter, and it is expressed profoundly in the psalms we read regularly in worship. Psalm 65 is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the creator. God is celebrated for being God. God forgives, creates, saves, does awesome deeds, provides rain that stimulates the earth’s productivity. Old Testament scholar James Luther Mays said that God, in Psalm 65, is a “cosmic farmer”: providing grain, watering the furrows—pastures overflow, hills gird themselves with joy, meadows clothe themselves with flocks, valleys deck themselves with grain. It is for all—all flesh, all nature. God’s goodness and generosity is for everyone. It is a gorgeous picture of abundance, richness, fertility, and it is at the very heart of our faith.

The Bible, on the very first page, says that God’s creation is good; it is full of God’s generosity and love. Ironically, Christians have seemed not always

to be convinced that creation is good. In the first few centuries of the Common Era, Christian theology fell under the influence of Greek philosophy that maintained that all reality is divided between two realms: the material world—the world of human bodies and senses and hungers and appetites—and the spiritual world, not physical, tangible, or sensual, separate from and superior to the material world with all its annoying temptations and needs and urges. It seemed that the purpose of religion ought to be to deliver people from that material world and deliver them safely to that other, ethereal, spiritual world.

The psalms are a corrective to that kind of thinking, particularly Psalm 65. God's creation is very good; God's goodness and grace are present in the creation.

The artists and poets know it. I was reminded by the God-as-"cosmic farmer" analogy that Wendell Berry is a farmer, on a small farm in Kentucky. One of his books of poetry is *Farming: A Handbook*: I looked it up and found "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer":

Growing weather: enough rain:
the cow's udder tight with milk:
the peach tree bent with its yield:
honey golden in the white comb:
the pasture deep in clover and grass,
enough, and more than enough.

What I know of spirit is astir
in the world. The god I have always expected
to appear at the woods' edge, beckoning,
I have always expected to be
a great relisher of the world. (p. 60)

God as a great relisher of the world—if that isn't a nice phrase, I don't know what is.

I was privileged to be part of a conversation with Wendell Berry once. We asked him about his church attendance. He said he attends a little Baptist church where his wife plays the organ. He told us about a young student supply preacher from the seminary who was holding forth about how wicked and sinful the world was with all its worldly temptations, how fallen and corrupt the flesh was, and how, all in all, this world was a terrible place. Berry said he looked around at the other farmers sitting in the pew. They looked uncomfortable. They had just come from milking the cows and walking the fields as the morning mists lifted and felt the warm sun on the backs of their necks. The world, they knew—in spite of the young

preacher's dogmatic certainty—was not a bad place but a good and beautiful and generous place.

I simply cannot preach a Thanksgiving sermon without Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose poem "God's World" my mother read to me every year:

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day,
. . . I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.

Norman Mailer died last week, another great American author: irascible, brilliant, married six times, irreverent. Mailer was audacious enough to write a book about Jesus in the first person singular, *The Gospel according to the Son*. His last book, just published, is *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. It's an extended interview actually, and in the introduction, Mailer wrote, "I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate the nature of God. . . . My pride in the first thirty years of my life was to be an atheist—how much more difficult and honorable I then considered that to be, rather than having a belief in an almighty divinity. . . . It took a good number of years to recognize that I did believe in God, that I believed there is a divine presence in existence." God, Mailer said, he had come to visualize as an artist, not a law giver: "I see God as a Creator, the greatest artist."

And now the scientists are adding their voices. A few years ago, the Templeton Foundation published a book of stunning color photographs of outer space taken through the Hubble telescope, *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*.

Now there is a new Templeton Foundation book, *Reflections on the Nature of God*: more Hubble pictures but also beautiful photographs of nature—flowers, insects, coral, sea creatures. Martin Marty wrote a fine introduction. Near the beginning is an amazing picture of the Keyhole Nebula. The editor, Michael Reagan, comments, "The more we look at the basic structure of our universe, the more it appears to scientists that there is some hand that guided us into existence." There are reflections by T.S. Eliot, Galileo, Annie Dillard, John Calvin even, and Stephen Hawking, who writes, "The odds against a universe like ours coming out of something like the big bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications" (p.40).

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," we say every week. God is Creator. Creation is God's gift. You can see God in

creation. And the Bible teaches—and Christians believe—creation is abundant, sufficient for our needs. There is enough for everyone. There's a story about it in the Gospels. It's a beautiful story. At the end of a long day of teaching and healing, the crowd that followed Jesus wherever he went is still there. It's evening, time for an evening meal. "Send them away," the disciples tell Jesus, to the towns where they can find food. "You feed them," he responds. "Impossible: we have virtually no food, barely enough for ourselves: five loaves of bread and two fish." The crowd sits. Jesus prays, blesses, breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples to distribute. All eat and are filled. There is enough for all, more than enough, twelve basketsful of leftovers, an abundance.

Walter Brueggemann says, "The feeding of the multitudes . . . is an example of the new world coming into being through God. . . . When Jesus fed the hungry crowd, he demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. . . . The creation is infused with the Creator's generosity, and we can find practices, procedures, and institutions that allow that generosity to work" ("The Liturgy of Abundance, Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century*, 24 March 1999).

The problem, Brueggemann says, is that we don't really believe it. We don't trust the abundance. Instead we operate on the basis of scarcity. There isn't enough, so we have to make ourselves safe and secure by getting more. Like the man in the story Jesus once told whose barns were overflowing with grain and whose solution was to build more barns, we are convinced that more will make us secure—more money, more commodities, more weapons—and nothing is more of a lie than that.

We have so much we don't even notice, Brueggemann says. We no longer recognize our prosperity—or the poverty of the other. A friend of mine, Presbyterian minister, social activist, who works with indigenous people of Peru where a huge multinational corporation was polluting the water and atmosphere and making people sick, was leading a discussion group of church people. In the group was a woman from Peru. As is customary in these kinds of church meetings, my friend asked everyone to introduce themselves by telling something about themselves. My friend started: "Chuck and I have three children," she said. "They are all in college—and we're poor," she joked. The Americans laughed. The woman from Peru interrupted, "No. No. No. You are not poor, not at all poor. I am poor."

We're so accustomed, we don't even notice. Someone asked Anne Lamott once what it's like to make a lot of money after being poor most of her life. She said it's more fun being rich than poor.

I had the fantasy that if I made a certain amount of money I'd be okay and stop thinking about it. Then I got to that level and discovered that the drug of choice is more. . . . I know that if I feel any deprivation or fear, the solution is to give. The solution is to go find some mothers on the streets of San Rafael and give them tens and twenties and mail off another fifty to Doctors without Borders. Because I know that giving is the way we feel abundant. Giving is the way we fill ourselves up. ("Day by Day", in *Common Boundary*, Arline Klatte Ennis, pp. 18-24)

The world is filled with abundance. There is enough for all. When bread is broken and shared, a miracle happens. Abundance takes over and everyone is filled. When bread is shared, Jesus promised, there will be enough for all.

Something like that happens at Sunday Night Suppers in our Dining Room when our Social Service Center and volunteers welcome 125 hungry neighbors for a nutritious meal. And Monday night at Catholic Charities when Fourth Church Deacons and volunteers provide a meal for 130 hungry homeless neighbors and Friday Night when volunteers from Fourth Church and Holy Name Cathedral provide a meal. A miracle happens. Bread is broken and shared and all are fed.

At Monday Night Supper there was a special Thanksgiving celebration last year, as there will be tomorrow night.

There is a volunteer host or hostess at each table who asks a guest to offer the blessing. On this occasion, however, each guest was given a copy of "Now Thank We All Our God" and 130 guests read it together:

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.

Volunteers were deeply moved. Then each table of 10 was asked to list things for which they were grateful and to choose someone to read their list to the entire assembly.

Here are some of the responses:

Waking up in the morning
Good health
Great friends

Ham
The ability to walk
Being alive
For Fourth Church and Monday Night Supper
My daughter
Being sober
Life
God

The whole creation is full of the glory and goodness and generosity and love of God. The world is full of the abundance of God, and when bread is broken a miracle happens and all are filled.

We began with Kurt Vonnegut's Uncle Alex, and with students naming a teacher who made them feel alive. "If that isn't nice, I don't know what is," Uncle Alex said.

So now this morning, right here, I invite you to take the card from the bulletin and sometime between now and the offering, write on it one thing for which you are grateful and want to thank God. At the time of the offering, please place the card in the plate and offer your gratitude to God.

In the church of my childhood we used to sing it a lot. It is still one of my favorites:

For the beauty of the earth,
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies. . . .

For the wonder of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon, and stars of light. . . .

Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

If that isn't nice, I don't know what is.